

Fix Yourself or Fix the System? Divergent Messages in Women's
Career Advice Books

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Abstract

This study is about how women's career self-help books frame the public's understanding of gender inequality and professional success. Women's career self-help books play a central role in framing the public's understanding of gender inequality and professional success. Authors like Sheryl Sandberg propose that women should "lean in" by increasing confidence and building leadership, while critics in sociology and feminist scholars insist that the emphasis on individual change fails to account for deeper cultural, institutional, and structural barriers.

Previous research suggests that structural factors are key to understanding women's economic outcomes and highlight the limits of individualistic explanations. Existing sociological research suggests structural factors such as occupational segregation, wage gaps, and caregiving burdens are key factors to understanding women's economic outcomes, emphasizing the limits of explanations that focus exclusively on individual behavior. For example, research on gender-based wage variation stresses the importance of marital status, children, and institutional discrimination in determining labor market outcomes (Bach, Chernozhukov, and Spindler 2018). Changes in cultural expectations about life stages, including trends such as declining marriage rates among women and transformed expectations about family and work, further demonstrate the complex interaction between social forces and individual decisionmaking.

The question addressed in this thesis is the degree to which bestselling career self-help books for women focus on individual solutions versus social and structural explanations for women's career challenges. Based on qualitative content analysis, this thesis examines three bestselling books offering women career advice, *Lean In* by Sheryl Sandberg, *The Confidence*

Code by Katty Kay and Claire Shipman, and *Get to Work* by Linda R. Hirshman, in order to assess the degree to which their guidance focuses on individual solutions versus social and structural explanations for women's career challenges.

To test this, the study uses qualitative content analysis and systematic coding of text. Sections of the text from each book were systematically coded into categories identifying internal mindset, skills, and choice framing, all of which reflect individualistic explanations. Individualistic explanations were contrasted with sociological frames focused on structural barriers, policy interventions, and cultural critiques.

The findings suggest that these books vary in their emphasis on individual versus structural explanations. The analysis reveals that *Lean In* and *The Confidence Code* predominantly present women's professional obstacles as demanding personal adjustment and confidence-building, although simultaneously recognizing social norms that influence career paths. *Get to Work*, in direct contrast, brings attention to structural barriers such as workplace design and family responsibilities, proposing solutions centered on policy change and collective action. These patterns echo ongoing academic debates about the shortcomings of self-directed guidance and the need to account for broader social contexts influencing gender inequality. By measuring and comparing the prevalence of these frames across texts, this thesis adds empirical evidence to multidisciplinary discussions about the relationship between individual agency and social structure in efforts toward gender equity.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Women's involvement in paid employment has increased dramatically in recent decades, yet ongoing gender inequalities remain central in shaping women's professional outcomes (England and Folbre 2005; Hochschild 1989; Acker 1990; Collins 2019; Collins et al. 2023, Harrington and Kahn 2025; Olivetti and Petrongolo 2017). Recent scholarship emphasizes that while women's labor force participation has normalized, the conditions under which women work remain deeply gendered, particularly in relation to caregiving expectations and institutional support for working families (Collins 2019; Collins et al. 2023). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2000), between 1950 and 1998 the labor force participation rate for women ages 16 and older rose from approximately 33.9% to 59.8%, signaling dramatic growth in women's involvement in paid employment from the mid-twentieth century onward. This trend has continued alongside shifting work arrangements such as remote work, which recent research suggests may reshape, but not eliminate, gendered labor market inequalities (Harrington and Kahn 2025).

Yet, at the same time, cross-national research indicates that policy frameworks, such as parental leave and childcare support, play a critical role in mediating the relationship between women's employment and gender equality outcomes (Olivetti and Petrongolo 2017; Carlson 2013). Even as women now surpass men in educational attainment in the United States (National Women's Law Center 2017), they continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles, concentrated in lower-paying occupations, and carry a disproportionate burden of unpaid caregiving labor (England and Folbre 2005; Hochschild 1989; Acker 1990; Ciciolla and Luthar 2019; Ruppner et al. 2025; Collins 2019). This unequal division of labor within the household

has been shown to persist even among dual earner couples where women often assume the role of primary household managers. Women are coordinating and performing “invisible” labor that remains undervalued in both economic and social terms (Ciciolla and Luthar 2019). Specifically, researchers note that “[w]hile differences in human capital characteristics have diminished over time, there remains substantial heterogeneity in the gender wage gap across women,” demonstrating how structural factors like marital status, occupation, and caregiving remain central in shaping earnings outcomes as opposed to individual effort alone (Bach, Chernozhukov & Spindler, 2018; Olivetti and Petrongolo 2017).¹ Furthermore, attitudes surrounding gender roles and perceived entitlement within households continue to reinforce inequalities, as both men and women may internalize norms that justify unequal divisions of paid and unpaid labor (Fetterolf and Rudman 2014).

Collectively, these patterns reveal that formal access to education and employment alone has not resulted in full workplace equality, as persistent inequalities are reinforced by unequal divisions of household labor, cultural expectations surrounding motherhood, and broader institutional arrangements shaping work family dynamics (Ciciolla and Luthar 2019; Collins et al. 2023; Ruppanner et al. 2025). In particular, recent work highlights how mothers continue to experience a “motherhood penalty,” whereby caregiving responsibilities negatively impact wages, career advancement, and employer perceptions, even in contexts where workplace flexibility has increased (Harrington and Kahn 2025; Collins 2019). Consequently, questions concerning why gender inequality endures and how it should be confronted remain central

¹ Here, *human capital* includes characteristics such as education, work experience, and job skills that are commonly believed to determine earnings.

concerns within sociological and feminist theory (Acker 1990; Hochschild 1989; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Collins et al. 2023; Ruppner et al. 2025). Addressing these enduring inequalities requires not only individual, or micro-level changes but also structural or macro-level transformations in workplace policies and cultural norms surrounding care, work, and gender (Collins et al. 202; Olivetti and Petrongolo 2017).

Concurrent with academic debates about gender inequality at work, a prominent genre of popular literature has developed to provide guidance for women navigating professional life. Career advice and self-help books targeted at women promise strategies for success, fulfillment, and advancement, frequently depicting workplace barriers as challenges that can be overcome through personal effort and confidence-building. These texts exert significant influence in shaping public perceptions of gender inequality by simplifying complex social problems into accessible accounts about personal responsibility and choice (Orgad and Gill 2022). In this context, career advice literature can be understood as part of a broader neoliberal cultural framework that emphasizes individual agency, self-optimization, and personal responsibility over structural critique. This thesis locates such career advice literature within broader scholarly debates on women, work, and inequality, charts the rise of individualistic frameworks in self-help culture, outlines sociological critiques of these approaches, and presents the research questions and significance of the study.

1.1 Women, Work, and Career Advice Literature

Linda Hirshman's *Get to Work* was written in 2006 by Linda Hirshman, a philosophy professor and former lawyer. She was responding to media discourse about well-educated,

professional women quitting their jobs after marriage and childbearing, and she clearly states that she is only addressing women who are well-off enough to quit their jobs, not the majority of women who have to work to support themselves and their children. She looks at diverse sources, particularly a month of *New York Times* brides and their subsequent career trajectories including how many quit their jobs, and Mommy Blogs, using these cases to illustrate what she sees as a broader cultural retreat from feminism among elite women. Hirshman has a snarky style making pointed comments about women who defend being stay-at-home moms while giving young women advice to stay in the labor market at all costs, framing continued employment as both a personal responsibility and a feminist obligation. While her book became well-known, in part thanks to the National Public Radio interview, it was controversial, particularly for her unbridled critiques of women who leave the labor force to mother and for unusual solutions like refusing to bear more children for husbands who don't do their fair share of the second shift. Hirshman actually received hate mail and went on to write about it, highlighting the intensity of public reactions to debates over women's "choices" and the boundaries of feminist critique.

A second influential book is *Lean In*, published in 2013 by Sheryl Sandberg, then the Chief Operating Officer of Facebook. Sandberg became widely known not only because of the book itself but because of her high powered position at a globally recognized technology company. This lent authority and visibility to her perspective on women's advancement. In *Lean In*, she argues that women's underrepresentation in leadership positions is partly the result of internal barriers, such as lack of confidence, risk aversion, and a tendency to underestimate their own abilities. Drawing on her own career experiences as well as survey data and workplace examples, Sandberg encourages women to assert themselves, pursue leadership opportunities,

and remain committed to their careers even while navigating marriage and motherhood. The book adopts a motivational tone and provides practical advice aimed at individual behavior change, positioning success as something women can achieve by adjusting their attitudes and actions. While *Lean In* became a cultural phenomenon and was widely embraced in corporate and professional circles, it also generated criticism for focusing primarily on privileged women and for downplaying structural inequalities that shape workplace outcomes.

Another widely read contribution to career advice literature is *The Confidence Code* by Katty Kay and Claire Shipman, published in 2014. The authors, both journalists, draw on scientific research, interviews with successful women, and their own professional experiences to argue that confidence is a key factor shaping women's career outcomes. They suggest that women are less likely than men to take risks, speak up, or pursue opportunities due to lower self-confidence. This gap helps explain persistent gender disparities in leadership and advancement. The book blends popular science with self-help, translating research from psychology and neuroscience into accessible advice aimed at helping women build confidence through action, risk-taking, and behavioral change. Like *Lean In*, *The Confidence Code* frames workplace challenges in terms of internal barriers that women can overcome through self-improvement, emphasizing mindset and behavior as central to success. While the book was well received for making research on confidence accessible to a broad audience, it has also been critiqued for placing responsibility on women to change themselves rather than addressing the structural and cultural conditions that shape confidence in the first place.

Sociological research has repeatedly documented gender inequality in the labor market, such as occupational segregation, wage disparities, and unequal access to positions of authority (Acker 1990; England and Folbre 2005). Women remain overrepresented in lower-paid care occupations, while men remain overrepresented in high-status and leadership roles (England and Folbre 2005; Hochschild 1989). For instance, women make up about 58% of workers in low-wage jobs in the United States, while representing less than half of the overall workforce (National Women’s Law Center, 2023). Even inside the same occupations, women are paid less on average than men, a gap that persists beyond differences in education or experience; for example, in 2023, women employed full time earned roughly 83% of what men earned in median weekly pay (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). Scholars indicate an interplay of structural factors, such as organizational practices, discrimination, and the unequal distribution of caregiving responsibilities, to help describe these outcomes: “Most studies that have attempted to quantify gender inequality in earnings ... have generally reported wage gap estimates... Most women in the labor force... earn significantly less than comparable men,” highlighting deep structural inequality instead of individual deficiency (Bach et al., 2018).

Simultaneously, women’s experiences of work are increasingly influenced not only by labor market structures, but also by cultural narrative that structures what success looks like and how it should be gained. Career advice literature targeted at women is an influential cultural institution where these narratives are created and circulated. In this study, career advice literature refers to popular self-help and professional development texts aimed at women, authored by corporate leaders, journalists, and scholars. These works promise actionable guidance on managing professional settings, balancing work and family, and addressing barriers to

advancement. Because these texts are widely read and often written by prominent figures, they deeply influence how women interpret their own experiences at work and how inequality is defined.

Rather than framing gender inequality as a systemic issue, much of the writing focuses on individual agency, urging women to fix their behavior, mindset, or ambitions. In having this positive response to workplace challenges, these career advice books often transform structural inequalities into personal dilemmas, portraying success as the outcome of the “right” choices and attitudes. This focus on individual solutions reflects broader processes of individualization identified in sociological theory, where structural constraints are reframed as matters of personal responsibility and self-management. For instance, widely circulated texts such as *Lean In* encourage women to cultivate confidence and ambition as primary strategies for advancement. Being able to understand how these texts talk about women’s career challenges is crucial for analyzing their broader cultural and political implications.

1.2 The Rise of Career Self-Help and Individualistic Frameworks

The importance of women’s career self-help books indicates a broader cultural shift toward individualism in accounts of social inequality. Self-help literature has developed alongside neoliberal ideals that encourage personal responsibility, self-management, and market driven approaches to social problems. *Neoliberalism*, in this context, constitutes a broader political and cultural logic that prioritizes market-based solutions and individual responsibility over collective or structural interventions (Fraser 2013). Within this perspective, people are encouraged to see success and failure as end results of their own individual choices rather than

results shaped by structural conditions. According to C. Wright Mills' concept of the *sociological imagination* (1959), sociological perspectives emphasize that “neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both” (p. 3), highlighting how agency and structure must be considered together to understand social outcomes.

Popular career advice books such as *Lean In* (2013) and *The Confidence Code* (2014) represent this individualistic orientation. These texts, authored by individuals with backgrounds in corporate leadership and journalism, have reached wide audiences and have been instrumental in shaping contemporary discourse about women and work. These books put the spotlight on psychological traits, such as confidence, ambition, and risk-taking, and encourage women to adapt their behavior in order to navigate success within male-dominated institutional settings. The advice given is centered on speaking up and negotiating more assertively while mitigating self-doubt. While such guidance may reflect readers' lived experiences, it also reinforces the idea that inequality can be resolved through individual level change.

This individualistic framing of solutions mirrors broader trends in contemporary culture that place the burden on individuals instead of on unequal systems. Such narratives align with what sociologists describe as the *individualization of social problems*, where systemic inequalities are understood as issues of personal responsibility and self-improvement (Fraser 2013). By placing responsibility for change on women themselves, women's career self-help literature risks obscuring or minimizing the influence of organizations, policies, and social norms

in creating unequal outcomes. These texts require careful examination not only for what they say, but for how they describe the causes of and solutions to gender inequality at work.

1.3 Sociological Critiques of Individualized Explanations

In comparison to self-help texts, sociological and feminist scholars have long argued that gender inequality at work cannot be explained by individual behavior alone. Past research on labor markets calls attention to the enduring impact of occupational segregation, gendered expectations, and institutional discrimination on women's careers (Acker, 1990; Blau & Kahn, 2017). Studies of gender-based wage variation, for example, show that factors such as marital status, parenthood, and organizational practices play a huge role in influencing women's earnings and advancement beyond individual effort (Bach, Chernozhukov & Spindler, 2018; Hochschild, 1989). These findings point to the importance of structural explanations that locate inequality within broader social, economic, and institutional contexts rather than within individual shortcomings. Feminist scholars have likewise emphasized the centrality of unpaid labor and caregiving responsibilities in shaping women's work lives (Hochschild, 1989; Acker, 1990; Fraser, 2013). Regardless of increased labor force participation, women still perform a disproportionate share of household and caregiving labor, which limits their availability for paid work and even advancement (Hochschild, 1989; England and Folbre, 2005).

These problems are strengthened by workplace norms. Telling women to just simply "try harder" or "lean in" does not account for the structural conditions that make such strategies unevenly viable. Such critiques highlight how organizational expectations, such as long working hours and uninterrupted career trajectories, are often incompatible with the realities of caregiving

responsibilities, a tension that Fraser (2013) conceptualizes as a broader “crisis of care” within contemporary capitalist societies.

More generally, sociological critiques contest the cultural emphasis on choice that grounds much career advice literature. Self-help texts may frame women’s decisions about work and family as choices, yet scholars suggest these “freely chosen” choices are actually picked according to social expectations, economic constraints, and institutional arrangements (Hochschild 1989; Collins 2019; Goldin 2014). In this sense, what appears as individual choice is often structured and constrained by broader social forces. By emphasizing individual agency without sufficient attention to structural factors, popular career advice risks normalizing inequality by placing responsibility for systemic problems on individual women. This critique is central to understanding how cultural narratives can both reflect and reproduce existing inequalities.

1.4 Research Questions and Significance of the Study

This thesis engages these debates by examining how women’s career advice books portray the causes of and solutions to gender inequality at work. In particular, it asks: To what extent do popular career advice texts emphasize individualistic explanations such as attitude or mindset versus sociological explanations that focus on social norms or structural barriers? How do different authors vary in their framing of women’s career challenges? And what broader implications do these frames have for understanding gender inequality? These questions are designed to bridge cultural analysis with sociological theory, linking representations of work in popular texts to larger discussions about agency and structure.

To address these questions, this study conducted a content analysis of three bestselling women's career advice books: *Lean In* (2013) by Sheryl Sandberg, *The Confidence Code* (2014) by Katty Kay and Claire Shipman, and *Get to Work* (2006) by Linda R. Hirshman.² These texts were chosen due to their popularity, influence, and differing authorial perspectives.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 The Individualization of Career Success

A central theme in mainstream career-advice writing is the concept that gendered barriers can be addressed largely through individual change: confidence, mindset, impression management, and strategic “leaning in” (Gill and Orgad 2022). This attention to self-transformation is particularly visible in widely circulated texts such as *Lean In* and *The Confidence Code* which frame personal development as the primary pathway to professional success. This framework reflects what feminist scholars understand as part of a broader neoliberal turn in which social problems are translated into individualized responsibilities, positioning the self as something to be continually optimized (Orgad and Gill 2022; Acker 1990). This emphasis on individual-level solutions can be influential because it offers clear steps and a sense of control; however, it simultaneously narrows what is understood as a “solution” by diverting attention away from institutions, labor markets, and policy. While such approaches may resonate with women’s lived experiences of navigating workplace challenges, they risk obscuring the structural conditions that shape those experiences. As a prominent critique of

² Linda R. Hirshman, *Get to Work: A Manifesto for Women of the World* (New York: Viking, 2006). In later editions, the subtitle was changed to *And Get a Life, Before It's Too Late*.

“confidence culture” puts it, women are represented as, “held back... by their own lack of confidence... entirely an individual and personal matter” rather than a result of underlying social structures (Gill and Orgad 2022). In this regard, career advice often operates both ideologically and practically. It positions workplace inequality as something to be navigated through self-management rather than prompting collectively addressed through structural reform. The emphasis rests on adapting the individual woman to existing organizational cultures, rather than scrutinizing why those cultures continue to reward masculine norms of leadership, availability, and ambition.

Put differently, when professional success is individualized, inequality risks turning into a problem of women’s choices and women’s psychology rather than a product of workplaces, pay systems, and gendered expectations that are embedded across the life course (Acker 1990; Hochschild 1989). This shift is consequential because it subtly displaces responsibility from employers, states, and institutions directly onto women themselves. If advancement depends primarily on confidence, resilience, or self-branding, then failure risks being read as an individual failing instead of evidence of discriminatory systems, cultural biases, or unequal distributions of care work. In summary, structural inequalities may become normalized or rendered less visible within dominant cultural narratives.

2.2 Gender Inequality, Work, and Structural Constraints

In comparison, sociological and feminist scholarship illustrates how workplaces are structured around unequal power, gender segregation, statistical discrimination, and job “fit,” and the ways these dynamics generate inequality even when individual women work diligently, attain

education, and develop valued skills (Acker 1990; Blau and Kahn 2017; Goldin 2014; England and Folbre 2005). Instead of framing disadvantage as a result of individual deficiencies, this body of work shifts analytical attention toward the structured and institutionalized nature of inequality, emphasizing how outcomes are conditioned by institutional arrangements, labor market sorting, and historically embedded expectations (Acker 1990; Carr et al. 2018). Joan Acker's (1990) cornerstone argument is that inequality is not an "add-on" to nominally neutral organizations; rather, gender is woven into organizational processes, meaning _____. Instead, She advocates for theories that "examine organizations as gendered processes" rather than operating under assumptions of neutrality (pg.146). Under this formulation, everyday practices like hiring criteria, evaluation standards, promotion pathways, and expectations around availability are already gendered and are frequently privileging an "ideal worker" norm that is structured around uninterrupted careers and freedom from caregiving responsibilities (Acker 1990; Hochschild 1989; England and Folbre 2005).

Structural constraints, for example, are reflected in quantitative analyses on earnings (Blau and Kahn 2017). Work on the gender wage gap has increasingly emphasized the uneven nature of inequality (Blau and Kahn 2017; Bach et al. 2018). It depends on family status, socioeconomics, and other social characteristics (Blau and Kahn 2017). This heterogeneity undermines any singular account of women's disadvantage, indicating that inequality is hierarchically structured and cumulative rather than uniform (Blau and Kahn 2017; Budig and England 2001). For example, one study indicates, "the extent to which women were affected... depended greatly on socio-economic characteristics" (Blau and Kahn: 2017: pg. 789). Similarly, economic research by Claudia Goldin (2014) revealed that the persistent gender wage gap cannot

be fully attributed to differences in education or skills, but is influenced by structural factors such as workplace organization, parenthood, and the high cost of job flexibility. Goldin's work reveals how temporal demands within occupations, such as long, inflexible hours, systematically constrain those with caregiving responsibilities (Goldin 2014; Hochschild 1989). This, in turn, embeds inequality within the very structure of jobs rather than in individual choices (Acker 1990; Goldin 2014). These findings support the broader claim that "women" cannot be treated as a labor-market category and that gender inequality is produced through intersecting social hierarchies (Budig and England 2001; England and Folbre 2005).

Overall, the studies reveal that even highly motivated individuals are constrained by gendered opportunity structures. Some of these constraints are promotion ladders, "ideal worker" expectations, and occupational segregation that persist regardless of individual traits such as confidence (Acker 1990; Blau and Kahn 2017). These patterns suggest that inequality cannot be reduced to individual positioning within the labor market, but is reproduced through persistent institutional structures that shape access to opportunities across time. As a result, approaches centered on individual advancement alone are unlikely to disrupt these broader dynamics. These approaches leave intact the organizational practices and cultural expectations through which inequality is produced. This perspective also draws attention to the importance of understanding how career trajectories are shaped cumulatively. Early disadvantages compound over time and restrict access to high-paying, secure, and flexible positions (Goldin 2014; Blau and Kahn 2017). In this sense, gender inequality persists not despite women's qualifications and efforts, but through the very structures that shape and constrain their opportunities.

2.3 Cultural Norms, Family, and the Life Course

Another body of research documents how cultural expectations around caregiving, marriage, and motherhood shape career paths in consistent ways over time, often creating lasting disadvantages. Instead of working as isolated life events, these expectations are strung within social norms that systematically frame women's time, labor, and perceived commitments to paid work. From a life course perspective, these constraints accumulate over time, shaping women's career trajectories both before and after key events such as childbirth. Work on domestic labor argues that paid employment does not eliminate women's household responsibilities; in fact, it often creates additional demands. Hochschild's (1989) widely cited framing captures this with a blunt synthesis: "Most women work... one shift... and a 'second shift' at home"(pg. 3). This dual burden illustrates how labor market participation does not occur on a level playing field, but is overlaid onto pre-existing gendered divisions of labor in the household.

Family and care responsibilities affect the types of jobs that women are able to work. Pregnancy, part-time work, and caregiving leaves are all interruptions to women's professional careers that alter the amount of time and energy given to their jobs and result in penalties (Collins 2019; Goldin 2014). Workplaces have norms that are reinforced. It is expected for workers to be able to handle long hours and be constantly available (Kelly and Moen 2020). At the same time, there are demanding and ever-expanding cultural norms about "good mothers" (Killian 2023). All these pressures mean that caregiving decisions are not personal choices but rather responses to institutional expectations (Hochschild 1989). More generally, Paula England and Nancy Folbre (2005) propose that care labor is systematically undervalued as it is culturally

linked to femininity and moral responsibility, resulting in depressed wages and reduced institutional valuation. These overlapping expectations give rise to a systemic tension between the ideal worker and the ideal mother, placing women in an ongoing state of perceived inadequacy. This dynamic is clearly illustrated in specific labor markets, such as domestic work, where Lair and Andrews (2018) define nanny labor as “a particularly precarious occupation” marked by instability and minimal benefits.

Indeed, the domestic work job market is just one example of how gendered care labor is devalued. These dynamics are particularly visible in specific labor markets where care work is informalized and undervalued. Drawing on their analysis of nanny advertisements, Lair and Andrews (2018) propose that domestic work is “a particularly precarious occupation” associated with insecurity and limited benefits. This finding aligns closely with this thesis’ focus on when care labor is considered as informal, flexible, or “love-based.” Such framing allows institutions to shift responsibility for care onto private households rather than addressing it through formal labor protections or policy interventions. It enables institutions to offload costs onto families, with women bearing a disproportionate share.

2.4 Agency versus Structure in Feminist and Sociological Ideology

A central theoretical debate in feminist and sociological theory is how to hold agency and structure without oversimplifying either into either “women can do anything if they try” or “structures determine everything” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 62). Classical and contemporary sociological theory has long been concerned with this tension, emphasizing that social action is produced through the dynamic between individual agency and structural constraints (Ritzer

2011: 105–106). A valuable approach is to treat agency as real, but conditioned by context that makes some actions possible and limits others. This perspective is particularly important for analyzing career advice literature, which privileges individual action while downplaying the structural conditions that structure and constrain available choices.

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) reject the view of agency as purely individual willpower, but rather as an ongoing relationship with context, “temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments” (pg. 962). Their framework understands agency as shaped by past experiences, present contexts, and future possibilities which highlight its fundamentally relational and dynamic nature. This definition is helpful in this context since career advice books commonly represent agency as internal, discussing confidence, grit, and mindset, whereas sociological critiques emphasize that individual agency is carried out within institutions and cultural expectations. By contrasting these perspectives, this thesis shows how different understandings of agency lead to distinct interpretations of inequality and its potential solutions.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Content Analysis as Method

This study uses content analysis to assess how women's career advice books frame the drivers of gender inequality and solutions for workplace discrimination against women. Content analysis allows for systematic, theory-guided analysis, by analyzing recurring patterns within texts (Krippendorff 2018). Using this approach, the study looks at how authors construct explanations for inequality, the types of responsibility they highlight, and the kinds of solutions they suggest to readers. By identifying patterns in language, themes, and patterns of framing within multiple texts, content analysis allows for the interpretation of how cultural messages about gender, work, and success are communicated to readers. This method is well-suited for analyzing cultural materials such as advice literature because it enables researchers to analyze not only what themes appear, but also how social problems and solutions are characterized within broader cultural narratives.

Instead of seeing career advice books as impartial sources of guidance, this study examines them as cultural texts that both reflect and actively shape understandings of lived reality, including how individuals interpret work, success, and social experience. There are so many ways inequality can be understood, explained, and interpreted. Content analysis makes it possible to document themes, both individual, such as responsibility, confidence, and personal choices, and systemic including structural barriers, cultural norms, and collective solutions. Both of these methods fit into the This method therefore aligns closely with the study's central analytical focus: the relationship between individualized and structural understandings of inequality.

The purpose of this analysis is not to just focus on *frequency*, but to assess if the different *types* of explanations and solutions are highlighted, integrated, or given less attention across texts.

3.2 Selection of Texts

The three popular career advice books:

- *Get to Work* by Linda R. Hirshman
- *The Confidence Code* by Katty Kay and Claire Shipman
- *Lean In* by Sheryl Sandberg

These books were picked for a few reasons. First, all three of these books gained widespread visibility and commercial success in the U.S. in the first couple decades of the 21st century. This positions these books as contributors to public discourse in America about women's gender inequality and workplace disparities. As widely circulated texts, they not only reflect but also help shape dominant cultural narratives about women's work and success. For example, these books received coverage in major media outlets such as *The New York Times* and their authors were featured in prominent interviews and public forums, amplifying their reach and influence beyond academic or niche audiences. Linda Hirshman, author of *Get to Work*, was interviewed on NPR, further circulating her arguments about women's work and gender inequality within broader public discourse (Hirshman 2006). Secondly, while each book presents a distinct tone and approach, all the books are concerned with women's professional advancement. These similarities make them appropriate for comparative analysis. Thirdly, they collectively reflect diverse feminist perspectives ranging from a structural critique (*Get to Work*), to psychological and behavioral factors (*The Confidence Code*), to a focus on workplace-oriented empowerment (*Lean In*).

3.3 Coding Scheme and Analytical Framework

The analysis is shaped and grounded in a theory coding scheme created to differentiate between individualistic and sociological frames. The texts were coded into two overall categories—Individualistic (I) and Sociological (S). There were subcodes with more specific dimensions that are described in further detail below.

3.3.1 Individualistic Frames

Individualistic frames link women’s career outcomes mainly to traits, behaviors, or choices. These frames put emphasis on individual agency while giving less attention to structural constraints or social forces.

Four subcodes were utilized:

I1	Mindset / Confidence	Internal psychological factors such as confidence and ambition as influences on success or failure.
I2	Skills / Self-Improvement	Attention to skill, habit, and capability development through personal effort, training, or practice.
I3	Behavioral Adjustment	Guidance emphasizing behavioral adjustment within existing institutional contexts.
I4	Choice Framing / Personal Choice	Language that links outcomes to women’s choices rather than structural factors.

Language that links outcomes to women’s choices rather than to structural factors. This includes instances where responsibility for success or failure is attributed primarily to individual decision-making.

3.3.2 Sociological Frames

Sociological frames locate women’s career outcomes within broader social, institutional, and cultural contexts. These frames emphasize constraint, power, and the responsibility of society, in particular institutions such as family and government, to mitigate inequality. Four subcodes were used:

S1	Structural Barriers / Constraints	References to workplace design, caregiving burdens, labor market structures, or institutional obstacles.
S2	Policy / Organizational Solutions	Discussion of formal interventions such as family leave, childcare, workplace reform, or government policy.
S3	Cultural / Ideological Critique	Analysis of gender norms, cultural expectations, ideology, or dominant narratives shaping women’s choices and opportunities.
S4	Collective Action / Solidarity	Calls for collective solutions, social movements, political action, or coordinated reform rather than individual adaptation.

These different frameworks allow for systematic comparison of how often and how deeply the texts move beyond individualized explanations toward structural or collective approaches.

3.4 Coding Process and Reliability

The coding process consisted of careful and repeated readings of each text. The texts were initially identified as relevant to the analysis when they engaged with themes of women's work, career progressions, family roles, and inequality. Next, these segments were coded using the aforementioned coding scheme.

Coding was carried out by physical annotations (color-coded post-it notes corresponding to each code) and a Google Sheets database. All the codes have the chapter, page number, quotation, primary code, secondary code or subsequent code (when applicable), and a simple summary.

It was common for texts to have multiple codes when they combined both individualistic and sociological elements. For example, statements recognizing structural barriers but framing outcomes in terms of individual choice were coded using both S and I codes. This allowed the study to account for ambiguity and tension instead of placing texts into distinct categories.

This study was conducted by a single coder, however, reliability was ensured through consistent use of the coding framework, ongoing review of coded texts, and systematic memo-writing to record analytic choices and emerging patterns.

Code	Category	Description	Example Text	Book
I1	Mindset / Confidence	Internal psychological traits such as confidence or self-belief	“We hold ourselves back... by lacking self-confidence...”	Lean In, pg. 8
I2	Skills / Self-Improvement	Development of skills through effort and practice	“What matters is that mastering one thing gives you the confidence to try something else.”	The Confidence Code, pg. 40
I3	Behavioral Adjustment	Adapting behavior to succeed within existing structures	“When I don’t feel confident... it sometimes helps to fake it”	Lean In, pg. 33
I4	Choice Framing / Personal Choice	Outcomes framed as individual choices	“Not all women want careers. Not all women want children. Not all women want both. ... We each have to chart our own unique course and define which goals fit our lives, values, and dreams.”	Lean In, pg. 10
S1	Structural Barriers / Constraints	Institutional or structural obstacles	“Women’s work–family decisions are controlled by economic realities...”	Get to Work, pg. 5
S2	Policy / Organizational Solutions	Institutional or policy-based solutions	“Just changing the tax law would do a lot to free up women to decide whether to return home or not.”	Get to Work, pg. 5

S3	Cultural / Ideological Critique	Critique of norms and expectations	“She was so responsible that everyone in the family relied on her to babysit, cook, help out, and be polite and diligent, and Maya never complained.”	The Confidence Code, pg. 134
S4	Collective Action / Solidarity	Calls for collective or systemic change	“....without a movement to support them, women are not choosing the path to status and power alone”	Get To Work, pg. 23

Chapter 4: Findings

This section reports the findings of the qualitative content analysis of the three popular women’s career advice books: *Lean In* by Sheryl Sandberg, *The Confidence Code* by Katty Kay and Claire Shipman, and *Get to Work* by Linda Hirshman. Guided by a coding framework that differentiates individualistic approaches (centering on mindset, behavior, skills, and choice) from sociological approaches (centering on structural constraints, cultural norms, policy solutions, and collective action), this analysis documents how each text attributes women’s career outcomes and suggests solutions to gender inequality at work. The findings are organized by text and coding category in order to highlight both dominant patterns within each book and key contrasts across them. The results indicate a clear difference across texts, alongside areas of overlap in where responsibility for women’s advancement is located.

Table 4.1. Score Distribution Across Categories

Code	Lean In	Confidence Code	Get To Work	Total
I1	High (18)	Very high (25)	Low (4)	47
I2	Medium (12)	High (18)	Low (5)	35
I3	High (16)	Medium (10)	Low (3)	29
I4	High (14)	Medium (9)	Low (4)	27
S1	Medium (6)	Low (4)	Very high (20)	30
S2	Low (3)	Very low (2)	High (12)	17
S3	Low (5)	Medium (8)	High (15)	28
S4	Low (4)	Low (3)	High (14)	21
Total	78	79	77	Average: 29.25

Source: Counts compiled by author.

The table demonstrates a clear pattern: individualistic codes (I1–I4) dominate in *Lean In* and *The Confidence Code*, whereas sociological codes (S1–S4) are most prominent in *Get to Work*. Out of the 234 total coded excerpts across all three books, 138 instances (59%) were categorized as individualistic, while 96 instances (41%) were categorized as sociological.

Within all categories, I1 showed the highest frequency form of advice, with 47 coded instances. This suggests a strong emphasis on individualized strategies related to confidence, leadership, and personal advancement. In comparison, S2 was the least frequent category, appearing only 17 times across the texts.

When comparing the books in total, *The Confidence Code* contained the highest number of coded passages (79), followed closely by *Lean In* (78), while *Get to Work* contained the fewest (77). While the totals were relatively even, the distribution of code types differed

substantially between the texts. The average number of coded instances across the three books were 78.

To maintain consistency, coding categories were assigned according to comparative frequency counts within each text. Labels such as “Very high,” “High,” “Medium,” “Low,” and “Very low” reflected the relative concentration of coded passages instead of arbitrary assignment. Categories with the greatest frequency of occurrences were grouped as “Very high,” while those with fewer occurrences received lower classifications.

4.1 Individualistic Framing in *Lean In*

Lean In repeatedly positions women’s career challenges as issues grounded in individual level actions, beliefs, and decision making. Throughout the text, Sandberg highlights women’s internal barriers, such as uncertainty, fear, and hesitancy in self advocacy, as major challenges to professional success. As Sandberg notes, “We hold ourselves back in ways both big and small, by lacking self-confidence, by not raising our hands, and by pulling back when we should be leaning in (8). Sandberg further explains that “We internalize the negative messages we get throughout our lives” (ibid.). This expands her argument by suggesting that women not only face external messages, but also absorb and reproduce them internally. As a result, inequality is framed as something that operates through women’s own thinking and self-perception rather than through institutional constraints. This reinforces I1 (mindset/confidence), as internal psychological barriers are positioned as central to women’s lack of advancement, accounting for approximately 23% of all coded advice in *Lean In*.

Sandberg additionally links gender inequality to differences in self-perception, arguing that women tend to undervalue their own abilities relative to men. As she explains, “This phenomenon of capable people being plagued by self-doubt has a name—the imposter syndrome. Both men and women are susceptible to the imposter syndrome, but women tend to experience it more intensely and be more limited by it” (29). This psychological framing suggests that disparities in leadership and advancement are shaped not only by discrimination but also by women’s internalized self-doubt. As a result, inequality is reframed as an issue of perception *and* confidence rather than structural exclusion. This again reinforces I1 (mindset/confidence), as internal evaluation becomes a key determinant of success.

Moreover, Sandberg identifies a “leadership ambition gap” as a central explanation for gender inequality, arguing that “More men than women aspire to the most senior jobs” (16). This framing shifts the focus from barriers to access toward differences in aspiration, implying that inequality arises from women’s choices and preferences rather than structural constraints. By emphasizing ambition as a key determinant of success, Sandberg locates the problem within women’s goals and willingness to pursue leadership, rather than within institutional limitations that may restrict advancement.

Sandberg regularly urges women to “lean in” by speaking up, taking risks, and displaying confidence in male-dominated workplaces. As Sandberg states, “When I don’t feel confident, one tactic I’ve learned is that it sometimes helps to fake it” (33). Sandberg deepens this emphasis on individual action by asserting that “Opportunities are rarely offered; they’re seized” (34), suggesting that women must actively pursue advancement rather than wait for systemic change.

This statement further emphasizes the importance of individual initiative, suggesting that success depends on a woman's willingness to act assertively rather than wait for structural change.

By framing opportunity as something that must be actively pursued, Sandberg places responsibility on women to navigate and overcome workplace barriers independently. This aligns with I3 (behavioral adjustment), as women are encouraged to modify their actions to fit existing professional expectations. In this framework, workplace inequality is presented as something women can navigate through strategic self-management rather than as a problem requiring structural reform. Whereas Sandberg acknowledges the presence of discrimination and gender bias, these structural forces are treated as contextual barriers rather than root causes of inequality.

Choice framing (I4) also emerges as a central theme in *Lean In*. Women are viewed as their own personal decision makers. Women's ability to prioritize their professions and commit to their high pressure jobs is portrayed as their personal own doing. For example, reflecting on a meeting in which women were seated off to the side rather than at the main table, Sandberg depicted her effort to encourage them to assume a more active role, writing, "I motioned for the women to come sit at the table, waving them over so they would feel welcome" (27). While Sandberg does question the cultural expectations that discourage women's representation in leadership, she ultimately ends up putting the responsibility onto the women to ignore the norms, this interpretation by suggesting that, "they should have sat at the table even without an invitation" (27). This statement frames exclusion as partially self-imposed, as women are expected to actively assert their presence even in environments where they may feel unwelcome;

rather than critiquing the structure of the meeting or broader workplace norms, the burden is placed on women to change their behavior.

Sandberg briefly acknowledges the importance of structural support, noting that “Too few workplaces offer the flexibility and access to child care...” (Sandberg, pg. 8). This recognition indicates some awareness of institutional constraints that shape women’s career outcomes. However, these policy concerns are not developed into sustained arguments for organizational or governmental reform and instead remain secondary to the broader emphasis on individual action and self-improvement. As a result, S2 (policy solutions) is present but underdeveloped, reinforcing the prioritization of individual change over structural transformation.

More broadly, structural critiques (S1–S4) appear only intermittently throughout the text and are not treated as central to achieving gender equality. While Sandberg acknowledges issues such as discrimination and workplace inequality, these factors are framed as contextual challenges rather than systemic problems requiring institutional change. Organizational reform is therefore positioned as subordinate to women’s self-transformation. Overall, *Lean In* constructs gender inequality as a problem most appropriately addressed through individual action within existing institutional structures.

4.2 Confidence, Skills, and Self-Improvement in *The Confidence Code*

The Confidence Code places a strong emphasis on individual psychological characteristics, particularly confidence, as a primary determinant of women’s success. Unlike structurally oriented frameworks, the authors locate the source of gender inequality largely within women’s internal dispositions, arguing that confidence is both the key barrier and the key

solution. Kay and Shipman depict confidence not as an innate trait but as a learnable skill that women must actively cultivate through deliberate behavioral change. As the authors argue, “what we need to do is start acting and risking and failing, and stop mumbling and apologizing and prevaricating” (Kay and Shipman, p. 8). This call to action frames confidence as something that can be developed through practice, positioning women as responsible for transforming their own behavior. Consequently, the text is primarily characterized by I1 (mindset/confidence) and I2 (skills/self-improvement) codes.

Building on neuroscience, psychology, and behavioral research, Kay and Shipman contend that women’s lack of confidence, rather than a lack of competence, is the primary factor explaining disparities in leadership, pay, and promotion. They argue that “success correlates more closely with confidence than it does with competence” (11), suggesting that psychological factors outweigh structural or institutional ones. This framing shifts attention away from external barriers and toward internal limitations, implying that women’s advancement depends primarily on their willingness to assert themselves and take risks. The authors reinforce this perspective by emphasizing that confidence is developed through action, noting that “confidence is the stuff that turns thoughts into action” (45). In this way, confidence is constructed not only as a mindset but also as a behavioral skill that must be practiced and reinforced over time.

The book repeatedly encourages women to adopt an inward-focused approach to self-improvement. Women are urged to retrain their thinking, embrace failure, and develop resilience in the face of setbacks. For instance, the authors emphasize that confidence grows through experience, stating that “confidence is not a genetic gift; it is the result of practice, effort,

and persistence” (Kay and Shipman, p. 56). This statement directly aligns with I2 (skills/self-improvement), as it frames confidence as something that can be built through repeated effort and behavioral conditioning. Similarly, the authors highlight the importance of mastery, arguing that “what matters is that mastering one thing gives you the confidence to try something else” (Kay and Shipman, pp. 148–150), reinforcing the idea that skill-building and confidence are mutually reinforcing processes, with confidence emerging as a byproduct of competence developed through practice.

While *The Confidence Code* acknowledges the existence of gender socialization and cultural stereotypes, these factors are positioned primarily as influences on women’s psychology rather than as structural constraints requiring institutional change. The authors note that “the shortage of female confidence is more than just a collection of high-octane anecdotes or wrenchingly familiar scenarios. It is increasingly well quantified and documented” (13). This statement reframes systemic inequality as an aggregate of individual psychological patterns, thereby shifting the analytical focus away from institutions and toward individuals. Cultural expectations are treated as obstacles that women must overcome internally, rather than as external systems that must be transformed.

In this framework, structural or policy-based solutions (S2) receive minimal attention, and organizational responsibility for inequality is largely absent. The workplace is implicitly presented as a fixed environment that women must learn to navigate more effectively. Although discrimination and bias are occasionally acknowledged, the discussion consistently returns to the question of how women can adapt their behavior to succeed within existing systems. For

example, the authors highlight that “women effectively believe they’re 20% less valuable than men believe they are” (Kay and Shipman, p. 14), reinforcing the argument that inequality stems from women’s self-perceptions rather than from institutional inequities. The implied solution is not to change workplace structures but to change women’s beliefs about their own worth.

Moreover, the book promotes assertiveness and risk-taking as key strategies for overcoming confidence deficits. Women are encouraged to take action even in the absence of certainty, to speak up more frequently, and to pursue opportunities without waiting until they feel fully prepared. This emphasis aligns closely with I1 (mindset/confidence), as it frames confidence as a cognitive and emotional state that can be intentionally cultivated. At the same time, it reflects I2 (skills/self-improvement), as these behaviors are presented as skills that can be learned and practiced. The authors’ repeated focus on action underscores their belief that behavioral change precedes psychological change, reinforcing the idea that confidence is built through doing rather than thinking.

However, this individualized framing has important limitations. By focusing primarily on internal transformation, *The Confidence Code* minimizes the role of structural barriers such as unequal caregiving responsibilities, workplace discrimination, and policy constraints. While the authors acknowledge that women face different social expectations than men, these factors are treated as background conditions rather than central drivers of inequality. As a result, the burden of change is placed almost entirely on women themselves, who are expected to adapt to existing systems rather than challenge or transform them.

This approach contrasts sharply with structurally oriented analyses, which emphasize the need for institutional reform and collective action. In *The Confidence Code*, however, upward mobility is presented as achievable through individual effort alone. Confidence becomes both the problem and the solution, creating a closed loop in which women are responsible for overcoming the very inequalities they experience. This perspective risks overlooking the ways in which systemic factors constrain individual agency, potentially overstating the effectiveness of self-improvement strategies.

Ultimately, *The Confidence Code* advances a strongly individualized account of gender inequality, centered on I1 (mindset/confidence) and I2 (skills/self-improvement), which together comprise approximately 54% of all coded advice in the text. Confidence is framed as a learnable skill that women must actively develop through practice, risk-taking, and persistence. While the book acknowledges the influence of cultural norms, it largely sidesteps structural and institutional explanations, offering limited engagement with S2 (policy solutions) or organizational responsibility. As a result, women's internal transformation is presented as both necessary and sufficient for success, positioning confidence as the primary pathway to overcoming inequality.

4.3 Structural Critique and Policy Solutions in *Get to Work*

By contrast, *Get to Work* advances a primarily sociological framing of women's career inequality. Rather than locating inequality within individual women's attitudes, confidence, or ambition, Hirshman explicitly situated the problem within structural systems; markets, family

organization, and public policy shape and constrain women's choices. Hirshman challenges confidence-based and self-help explanations, asserting instead that women's work outcomes are influenced by structural barriers embedded in institutions, policies, and cultural norms. Her argument consistently emphasizes that inequality is reproduced not through isolated decisions but through patterned, systemic arrangements that advantage men and disadvantage women. This text is largely defined by S1 (structural barriers), S2 (policy and organizational solutions), and S3 (cultural critique) codes, representing approximately 61% of the advice given by the author.

Hirshman directly critiques the dominant discourse of "choice" that pervades career advice literature and popular feminism. As she states, "the most disheartening part about women deciding to stay home is that they say doing so is their choice" (16). This statement is central to her argument, as it challenges the widely accepted notion that women's labor market outcomes are simply the result of free, individual decision-making. She further argues that "'choice' is the weasel word," exposing how the language of choice functions ideologically to deflect attention away from inequality (18). By labeling choice as a "weasel word," Hirshman suggests that it disguises coercion and constraint under the appearance of autonomy.

Moreover, Hirshman emphasizes that "even the most empowered women do not see how narrow their options are at the moment of 'choice'" (17). This claim highlights how structural inequality becomes internalized, leading women to perceive constrained options as freely chosen paths. In this way, Hirshman reframes what appears to be individual agency as a socially produced outcome shaped by unequal distributions of power and responsibility. The concept of

“choice” is therefore revealed as not neutral, but as a key ideological mechanism that sustains gender inequality.

Hirshman further demonstrates that women’s work–family decisions are structured by material and institutional constraints. As she explains, “their men won’t carry enough of the household to enable them to succeed fully in the public world... there is no employer day care, and there are precious few government tax breaks” (1). This passage clearly illustrates S1 structural barriers, as it identifies multiple institutional failures within the family, workplace, and state that limit women’s participation in the workforce. The unequal division of labor in the household, combined with insufficient workplace accommodations and lack of supportive public policy, creates a system in which women’s withdrawal from paid work becomes highly predictable.

Hirshman identifies the family itself as a central site of inequality. She argues that “the thickest glass ceiling is at home” (1), a powerful reframing that shifts attention away from workplace discrimination alone and toward the private sphere as a critical mechanism of inequality reproduction. Additionally, she notes that “educated women opting out... reveals a hard truth... women have squeezed as much out of their days as they can without more help” (2). This highlights how time constraints and unequal domestic responsibilities function as structural barriers that limit women’s ability to remain in or advance within the workforce.

Hirshman also provides empirical evidence of this inequality, noting that “working mothers throughout society are doing 60 percent to 70 percent of the housework” (2). This statistic reinforces the argument that gender inequality in unpaid labor is not incidental but

systematic, and it directly impacts women's professional opportunities. She further argues that "gender ideology places these tasks on women's backs; women must demand redistribution" (Hirshman 2). This statement bridges S1 and S2 by identifying both the structural problem and the need for collective, systemic change.

As Hirshman notes, "If all of this sounds daunting, it's because for twenty-five years the only message women have heard are the ones telling them to forget their dreams and look homeward" (5). This quote is a strong example of S3 Cultural / Ideological Critique because it exposes how dominant cultural narratives shape women's aspirations and normalize their withdrawal from the workforce. These messages are not neutral but actively reinforce traditional gender roles, encouraging women to prioritize family over career. Thus, what is often interpreted as individual choice is revealed as an adaptation to unequal cultural expectations and structural constraints.

Hirshman expands this critique by arguing that "choice feminism... tells women that their choices... are good choices" (Hirshman 1), suggesting that even feminist frameworks can reinforce inequality by refusing to evaluate or challenge women's decisions. By validating all choices equally, this perspective limits the ability to critique structural constraints and weakens the potential for collective action.

In contrast to texts such as *Lean In* and *The Confidence Code*, Hirshman foregrounds the necessity of systemic reform, emphasizing that meaningful progress requires institutional transformation rather than individual behavioral change alone. She points to policy solutions, noting that "just changing the tax law would do a lot to free up women to decide whether to

return home or not” (Hirshman 5), and critiques workplace structures through the absence of “employer day care” (Hirshman 1), highlighting how policy and organizational conditions shape women’s decisions.

Collective responsibility and solidarity also emerge as central themes. Hirshman argues that “the leveling off of women’s professional ambitions today shows us one truth: without a movement to support them, women are not choosing the path to status and power alone” (Hirshman 23), underscoring the limits of individual action. She further contends that “only when women make it necessary for men to take on a fair share of the family labor will they do so” (Hirshman 4), emphasizing the role of collective pressure in transforming entrenched gender norms. Finally, she extends her critique to broader social consequences, arguing that “their talent and education are lost from the public world” (Hirshman 2), demonstrating that gender inequality affects not only individual women but also society as a whole.

Ultimately, Hirshman contends that substantive progress requires women to remain in the workforce in significant numbers and to actively demand institutional change. She rejects the idea that private adaptation—such as scaling back career ambitions—can resolve structural inequality. Instead, she argues that “a movement that stands for everything ultimately stands for nothing” (Hirshman 2), calling for a more focused and assertive approach to achieving gender equality.

In contrast to the other two books, *Get to Work* constructs a comprehensive structural critique of women’s inequality by integrating S1 (structural barriers), S2 (policy solutions), and S3 (cultural critique), while also emphasizing S4 (collective action). Individual solutions are

clearly constructed as insufficient for confronting institutional barriers. Hirshman's analysis ultimately reframes women's "choices" as constrained outcomes shaped by systemic inequality and argues that only coordinated, structural reform can produce meaningful change.

4.4 Comparing Individualistic and Sociological Frames Across Texts

Taken together, the three books show a clear separation between individualistic and sociological accounts of women's career inequality. *Lean In* and *The Confidence Code* both give priority to individuals' agency, highlighting mindset, behavior, and personal development. Those are the dominant avenues to success. While they acknowledge bias and inequality, these structural barriers are regarded as subordinate constraints rather than foundational causes of women's stagnating careers.

In comparison, *Get to Work* prioritizes structural factors over agency, contending that workplace structure, family structure, and public policy are central to shaping women's options. Rather than directing women to adapt to existing systems, Hirshman calls for systemic change. Despite these distinctions, all three books exhibit a shared foundational concern with women's advancement and note the ongoing nature of gender inequality even with formal legal equality. They diverge in markedly important ways in how responsibility is assigned: at the individual level or within social institutions. Yet, Viewed collectively the findings demonstrate how popular career advice literature presents contrasting narratives about gender inequality.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Interpreting Patterns of Individualization and Structure

In much common parlance/the public sphere, including many self books, there is a recurring tendency: problems are frequently defined as structural (sexism, bias, stalled progress), but proposed solutions are consistently redirected back to the individual woman (confidence, skills, better decision making, more strategic behavior). This is true of *Lean In* and *The Confidence Code*, but less true of *Get to Work*. This divide is important since it indirectly redefines inequality as a matter of personal responsibility for women, even when authors note broader barriers.

Sociological theory provides insight into why this pattern is so persistent. Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organizations discusses that workplaces do not operate as impartial arenas in which the "best" rise to the top. The ideal-worker norm itself is created around a masculinized, disembodied ideal and this standard is consistently created through everyday organizational processes and hierarchies. When career advice books operate on the assumption that success results from individual self management (standing for yourself, stronger negotiation and greater engagement), they take for granted the belief that organizations offer a level playing field and instead place responsibility on women to adapt their individual characteristics and behavior to make progress toward equity in the workforce.

It is crucial to not overlook agency. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) see agency as a process structured by past habits, directed toward projected futures and negotiated within present

constraints. This representation provides a core claim for this study: individual actions have real significance, but they are never independent of structure. They occur within social conditions that can grow or shrink what “choice” is realistically available.

5.2 Understanding Gender Inequality in Labor Markets

Rather than aligning with this body of research, these findings reveal a tension between structural explanations of gender inequality and the ways some career advice texts reframe these issues at the individual level. This demonstrates that gender inequality continues through multiple interrelated mechanisms rather than a single factor. Labor economics research stresses that the wage gap is structured by patterns of human capital, occupational and industry segregation, discrimination, and family labor divisions. These factors over time have changed in different levels of importance.

A primary structural mechanism is the motherhood penalty in earnings. Budig and England (2001) reveal a substantial wage penalty in relation to having children and maintain that part of what stays, after accounting for controls, likely signals productivity related effects and/or bias against mothers in employment. The idea of “work harder” advice usually misses the whole point; it does not matter even if women conform to all the norms, develop confidence, or “lean in”; penalties from labor market discrimination still happen. There is a structural emphasis in revealing that the gender wage gap is heterogeneous. It depends on the labor market, and recognizing this variation is critical for “closing the gap.” This finding aligns with my generalized argument about the messages targeted at professional-class women.

Ultimately, the findings are closely connected to work-family research. Hochschild's (1989) "second shift" model reveals how women's paid work increased without a corresponding increase in men's unpaid labor. This has resulted in a stalled revolution and persistent inequality in the household's allocation of time and energy, a pattern further documented by Kathleen Gerson in *The Unfinished Revolution: Coming of Age in a New Era of Gender, Work, and Family* (2010), which highlights how changing expectations about gender, work, and family have not been fully realized in practice.

All of these findings support the central claim that labor-market outcomes are inseparable from domestic conditions and telling women to optimize themselves without accompanying household and workplace structural change is ineffective.

5.3 Constraints of Self-Focused Career Advice

A key implication of this analysis is that self-focused advice functions as a cultural tool for addressing inequality that ultimately reproduces rather than challenges the system that holds women back. It provides women strategies for coping and advancing, while also normalizing the idea that responsibility for change rests with women rather than institutions. Monteverde's (2016) assessment of *Lean In* is particularly useful because it demonstrates how feminist language can be integrated with managerial and self help registers. She asserts that Sandberg's approach recasts structural gender inequality as an issue of individual ambition, resilience, and strategic career navigation, aligning feminist objectives with corporate imperatives rather than systemic restructuring. It creates an "inspiring call to action" that foregrounds self development

and adaptation, not structural change. Accordingly, empowerment rhetoric channels structural critique into personal projects.

This interpretation aligns with critiques of “confidence culture.” Pradhan’s (2023) review of Orgad and Gill’s (2022) book captures the central core argument that confidence discourse shifts responsibility onto individuals, specifically women, to fix systemic issues by personal self-improvement in place of collective or institutional change (Pradhan 2023). Gill and Orgad (2022) likewise contend that confidence culture shifts responsibility from structural systems onto individuals, casting inequality as a problem of individual psychology rather than structural change. Thus, Gill and Organ (2022) explain that the limitation is not that individual choice is without merit, but that it can depoliticize inequality through the privatization of social problems, overpromise control by implying that success depends on mindset and behavior despite structural constraints, mask organizational power by representing workplaces as gender neutral arenas, and reinforce class selectivity by presuming resources to supportive partners, flexible employment, and professional networks.

The significance of this study rests on its contribution to sociological and feminist scholarship on work, gender, and inequality. Although critiques of self-help culture are widespread (Orgad and Gill 2022; Fraser 2013), relatively few studies have offered systematic, comparative analyses of how individual texts combine agency- and structure-based explanations in their guidance to women. By focusing specifically on the intersection of cultural narratives and labor market inequality, this study highlights the influence of popular discourse on how gender and work are understood. By quantifying and comparing these perspectives, this research

clarifies the cultural messages women receive about success and responsibility. In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions about how inequality is interpreted, justified, and potentially challenged in contemporary society.

5.4 Contributions to Sociological and Feminist Theory

This study positions popular career advice books as a cultural institution that actively constructs interpretive frames, translating complex forms of inequality into accessible narratives and actionable guidance. It makes a theoretical contribution by empirically tracing how these texts blend agency-based and structure-based explanations, often resolving this tension through an emphasis on individual-level solutions. At a conceptual level, the findings connect to key strands of sociological research on women, work, and inequality in the workplace:

- **Gendered organizations (Acker):** inequality is sustained through seemingly neutral organizational practices and the normative ideal of the worker.
- **Agency under structural constraint (Emirbayer & Mische):** agency exists but is always embedded within temporal and structural contexts.
- **Work-family dynamics (Hochschild; Budig & England):** domestic labor and motherhood penalties shape women's career trajectories.
- **Critiques of neoliberal and therapeutic feminism (Orgad & Gill; Monteverde):** empowerment and confidence rhetoric can individualize structural inequalities.

Taken together, these connections support the argument that career advice is more than guidance, as evidenced by the preponderance of individual versus structural codes across the three books. Rather, it functions as a site of cultural negotiation in which the boundary between “personal responsibility” and “structural constraint” is continuously constructed and contested.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Overview of Findings

This thesis was designed to analyze how popular women’s career advice books explain the different explanations of gender inequality and provide different kinds of solutions for women’s professional advancement. Based on a qualitative content analysis of *Lean In*, *The Confidence Code*, and *Get to Work*, this study demonstrated a recurring, albeit inconsistent, pattern across the books. Gender inequality is most often diagnosed in structural terms, yet responsibility for change is repeatedly redirected toward individual women. Authors regularly note the role of sexism, workplace bias, and disproportionate caregiving burden, yet ultimately stress the importance of confidence, self-improvement, and personal choice as the main avenue for success. The exception was *Get to Work*, which simultaneously points to a need for systemic solutions, and urges women in the meantime to get a degree in a “practical” major, work to support themselves, and go on “reproductive strike” if their male partner does not shoulder his half of the second shift.

Counting the two categories of codes, as well as interrogating how they were used in the texts (as problem only or as problem and solution), revealed that individualistic frames, such as mindset, skills, and choice, appeared with greater frequency and were positioned as actionable responses. Sociological frames, such as structural barriers, cultural norms, policy interventions, and collective action, were acknowledged, but positioned as background context much of the time. While authors directly critiqued workplace institutions or gendered family arrangements, the burden of navigating these challenges was often put on women only. In this way, structural

constraints were recognized but rarely paired with equally robust structural solutions, creating an imbalance between diagnosis and prescription. This pattern suggests that while inequality is understood as systemic in origin, it is operationalized as an individual-level problem in practice.

Overall, the findings reveal that contemporary career advice books do not deny inequality at face value. Rather, inequality is reframed in ways that make it individually manageable, leading to complex social problems being presented as personal challenges to be resolved through individual effort. This neoliberal framing maintains a feminist critique on a surface level while ultimately restricting the scope of reform and, consequently, leaving women not only stuck in the same unequal position but blaming themselves for it. Furthermore, this framing has important implications for how women interpret their own experiences in the workplace. By emphasizing personal responsibility and self-transformation, these texts risk obscuring the role of institutions and policy in producing inequality, potentially discouraging collective action or demands for structural change. As a result, the solutions offered may be both empowering and limiting, equipping women with strategies for navigating inequality while simultaneously normalizing the very conditions that produce it.

6.2 Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations that need to be mentioned. To begin, the sample is restricted to three popular books focused on educated women in the United States, limiting the generalizability of findings. These texts are also written by highly visible, elite authors whose perspectives may not reflect the experiences of women across different class, racial, or occupational contexts. As a result, the analysis may privilege a particular segment of women, primarily professional, middle to upper-class women, while overlooking how career advice and inequality are framed for more diverse populations. Additionally, as a qualitative analysis, the study favors interpretive depth over breadth or statistical generalizability. Although patterns are systematically identified, the analysis does not seek to evaluate causal effects or audience outcomes.

The study examines texts rather than readers and, therefore, does not assess how audiences understand or respond to these messages. Future research could build on these findings by incorporating interviews, surveys, or experimental methods to evaluate how women interpret and apply the advice presented in these books. Such approaches would help determine whether individualistic framing actually shapes attitudes, behaviors, or perceptions of inequality. Finally, the analytical approach of qualitative content analysis means that findings reflect the study's theoretical orientation and the researcher's analytic judgment. However, openness in coding and direct engagement with the books help support the study's credibility. While efforts were made to apply codes consistently, alternative interpretations of the texts are possible, and different coding frameworks might yield somewhat different emphases or conclusions.

In spite of these limitations, this methodology offers a coherent analytical framework for assessing how career advice books construct inequality and responsibility. The study's research design provides insight into the cultural processes through which gender inequality is maintained. By focusing on widely read and influential texts, the analysis captures dominant narratives that shape public understanding of women's careers, even if it cannot account for all possible perspectives or outcomes.

6.3 Implications for Future Research

The outcomes of this study open up several lines of future research. First, additional work could move beyond highly visible career advice books to examine how individualizing frames appear across other domains, including education, social media, corporate culture, and workplace diversity initiatives. Examining how these frames circulate across institutional and cultural contexts would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how individual responsibility narratives are produced, reinforced, and normalized. Understanding how individualistic and structural frames travel across different contexts would deepen insight into the cultural reproduction of gender inequality.

In addition, future studies could investigate how readers interpret and act upon career advice. While this thesis focuses on texts, an open question remains regarding how women in different social locations, including class, race, and occupation, engage with these messages. Audience-centered research could reveal whether readers internalize, resist, or reinterpret individualizing narratives, as well as how these interpretations shape career decision-making and perceptions of inequality. Such approaches would help clarify the relationship between discourse and lived experience.

Next, comparative research could assess career advice tailored to different audiences, including men, working-class women, or marginalized racial and ethnic populations. This work would help determine whether individualizing messages are distributed evenly across groups or whether certain populations are more likely to be encouraged to pursue structural or collective solutions. Such comparisons could also illuminate how inequality is framed differently

depending on the target audience, revealing broader patterns in how responsibility is assigned across social groups.

Finally, future research could situate popular career advice literature within broader policy debates and organizational change initiatives. Bridging cultural analysis with institutional analysis would allow scholars to examine how narratives of empowerment interact with, support, or potentially undermine structural reforms aimed at addressing inequality. This approach would raise important questions about whether individual focused solutions complement or distract from policy-based interventions. More broadly, this research agenda would contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between cultural narratives, institutional structures, and processes of social change.

6.4 Final Reflections on Career Advice and Gender Equity

This study demonstrates that career advice is not simply practical advice aimed at individual success. Instead, it operates as a cultural site in which personal responsibility and structural constraints are continually negotiated. By combining ostensibly feminist discourses of self-help with managerial rationality, career advice books provide women with tools for coping and seeking advancement that may not ultimately enable them to overcome barriers in pay and promotion. While appearing empowering, this framing often privatizes responsibility, assigning women, rather than institutions, the primary burden of change. In doing so, these texts reshape the meaning of empowerment itself, redefining it as individual adaptation rather than collective transformation.

The consequences of this framing extend beyond individual outcomes. By individualizing inequality, it is rendered seemingly manageable while becoming more difficult to challenge at the structural level. Structural barriers remain largely unchanged, even as women are urged to adapt, optimize, and persist within systems that remain fundamentally unequal. This dynamic risks normalizing inequality by encouraging women to accommodate existing conditions rather than question or transform them. Over time, such narratives may contribute to the stabilization of unequal systems by framing them as inevitable or navigable through personal effort alone. This perspective does not dismiss the importance of individual agency. Individual choices are real and consequential, yet they are not autonomous; they are shaped by workplace norms, family structures, and broader social institutions that define the conditions under which “choice” is exercised.

More broadly, these findings raise important questions about the role of popular culture in shaping understandings of inequality. Career advice literature does not simply reflect existing social conditions, it actively participates in constructing the frameworks through which inequality is interpreted and addressed. As such, these texts play a significant role in shaping not only how women understand their own experiences, but also how responsibility for inequality is distributed across individuals and institutions.

In conclusion, attaining gender equity requires far more than improved advice directed at individual women. Meaningful change depends on transforming the institutional arrangements that structure work, family, and opportunity. By demonstrating how career advice literature frames inequality and responsibility, this thesis contributes to sociological and feminist scholarship that calls for structural, rather than exclusively individual, solutions. Ultimately, advancing gender equity requires not only empowering individuals, but also reimagining and restructuring the systems within which those individuals operate.

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